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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Jesus Christ as ancestor: an African Christian understanding

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communicate with him. Others use them because they were taught that this is the way you talk about him or to him. People use all these different names to describe Jesus Christ according to their understanding, knowledge, trust and belief in him. This article will describe how the Sotho, who are African Christians, from the township of Mohlakeng in Randfontein, know, understand, trust and believe in Jesus Christ according to the title of Great Ancestor. Views of the inhabitants of Mohlakeng are used to describe the complexity of the issue. This article discusses what the meaning of the concept of ancestor entails and determines whether Jesus can indeed be referred to as Ancestor. There are different answers to this question.

Keywords: Jesus as ancestor; African Christianity; Sotho people; Mohlakeng; Randfontein

INTRODUCTION

The names or titles given to Jesus Christ by African Christians are in line with their belief of what Jesus Christ can and cannot do for and to them, what he can be, who he is and who he is not. With these names given it is the only way for them to feel close and in a good harmonious relationship with him. A harmonious life is one of the most important elements in African tradition. To keep this harmony and this relationship in a good condition you need to have a way of communicating with each other, you need to talk to each other and have a certain way of talking. One needs a name to identify the One being addressed.

The article will also discuss why the Sotho give Jesus the name of Great Ancestor. This will illustrate their knowledge of him, their trust and their belief in him.

Research was done among the Sotho-speaking inhabitants of the township of Mohlakeng in Randfontein by way of informal conversations with the older generation from ages 40 to 90, and the filling out of questionnaires by the younger generation from ages 18 to 39.

Jesus Christ is and will always be an important part of every Christian's life on earth, no matter who or what you are. It is the belief of the authors that Jesus is understood in different ways by Christians. Jesus Christ is not just any person of authority, but God himself, which is why the African Christian way of naming Jesus Christ is important and why these can be important elements that we can use in theology.

WHAT IS AN ANCESTOR?

The belief in ancestors stands central in the traditional African thought and is an essential pillar of religion practiced in Africa (Stinton 2004:133–134). There are many different ways in which this acknowledgement of the existence of the deceased are expressed. Africa is not the only continent where cultures have the religious practice of venerating and worshipping ancestors (cf. Bae 2007:1).

Although this phenomenon takes on different forms among different ethnic groups in Africa, Nyamiti identifies certain common traits of ancestral beliefs (1984, cited in Stinton 2004:134):

Natural relationship

The natural relationship between the ancestor and earthly descendants is usually that of parent and offspring. Children consider parents and grandparents as direct ancestors.

Supernatural or sacred status

Ancestors automatically acquire some kind of supernatural power. This is based on the dynamistic and animistic worldview in Africa. Spirits of ancestors are not merely impersonal powers reigning over some holy domain. Ancestors stand in a personal relationship with descendants. Ancestors can be implored from time to time for advice on personal issues. Ancestors are worshipped and venerated ambiguously. Ancestors are simultaneously feared and adored. The same ancestors can bestow gifts of good fortune on one and can also cause harm and misfortune for those who neglect to acknowledge the ancestors.

Mediation

From a hierarchical superior position to humans, ancestors are inferior to God and act as mediators between God and humankind. Even holy functionaries like witchdoctors operate through the mediation of ancestors (Mbiti 1989: 84). Ancestors are not of divine nature. Together with their descendants, ancestors worship God (Stinton 2004:135). As mediators between God and humankind, ancestors do not possess the power to mediate salvation.

Sacred communication

Ancestors remain in contact with descendants for quite some time. They are still considered to take part in the daily routine of the family (Mbiti 1989:82). Ancestors are mostly acknowledged up to four or five generations whereupon the memory of these ancestors dies out and they are considered to be truly dead (Mbiti 189:83). The spirit of the deceased then becomes an impersonal spirit residing in the spirit world.

Exemplarity

Ancestors are considered to be good models for human behaviour. Their acts of virtue are seen as good examples of proper life. By their way of living they educate social behaviour.

Not all living have the privilege of becoming an ancestor. Two conditions are identified by Sarpong (1996, as cited by Stinton 2004:134–135):

1. One must pass through all stages of life to attain adulthood, which is only considered to arrive once one has had children and so has transmitted life.
2. One must die a natural death. Death by accident, suicide, unclean diseases or in childbirth is not considered a good death.

It would be interesting to research situations where a person dies due to HIV/AIDS. Would such a person still be considered an ancestor or would such a death disqualify one from becoming an ancestor? The scope of this article does not make provision for such a discussion.

FUNCTION OF ANCESTORS

There are three distinct functions of ancestors (Stinton 2004:135). Stinton mentions how Shorter calls the first function that of 'liturgical companions to the living' (1983, cited in Stinton 2004:135). The second function is to operate as mediators between God and humans (Stinton 2004:135). Stinton shows how Mbiti refers to the third function of ancestors as guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities (Mbiti 1989:85).

Companions on the journey of life

Africans have a circular understanding of time (Mbiti 1989:17). Life is the rhythmic progression through certain stages of life. All humans are subject to these phases. Birth, through puberty to adulthood and old age and even on to death are all stages through which all humans pass. To assist the successful completion of the cycle of life, the ancestors act as guides on this journey. At the onset of every stage there are rites to be performed to initiate one into the next phase. Ancestors play a spiritual role at these rites. Some, like Bujo, interpret the role of ancestors at these rites of passage as that of mediators of salvation (1992, cited in Stinton 2004:141). The completion of rites past on by the ancestors ensures salvation.

Ancestors have set the example of what the successful completion of the process looks like. Now they can provide advice on how to travel on this journey. In this sense ancestors become the spiritual guides to people. By ignoring the ancestors, one demonstrates arrogance and self-reliance for the journey of life. Such negligence toward the ancestors is punished with misfortune.

Mediators

Ancestors act as mediators between God and humans. Nürnberg illuminates this aspect very clearly when he presents the knowledge of African people of the transcendental world as that of a 'pool of power' (2007:29). The Supreme Being (God) would then be the culmination of this pool of power and not necessarily a person (Nürnberg 2007:29). In other words, the Supreme Being can be described as 'the peak of the spiritual hierarchy' (Nürnberg 2007:33). In this deistic and dynamistic spiritual realm the spirits of the deceased ancestors reside.

In the social structure of African cultures it is impossible for a person to approach a higher ranking individual, like for instance the village chief. Intermediaries are necessary. In the same fashion ancestors function as the 'go-betweens' between humans and God (Nürnberg 2007:33). Nürnberg is of the opinion that ancestors do not act on behalf of the Supreme Being and do not mediate sacrifices or prayers directed by humans to the Supreme Being. At most, ancestors derive their supernatural power from the 'pool of power' (Nürnberg 2007:33). The ancestors become the authority themselves that give advice and blessings (and misfortune) to humans (Nürnberg 2007:33). Ancestors therefore seem only to mediate the power from the Supreme Being.

Guardians of traditions

It would seem as if ancestors function as the social conscience of a community. The norms and moral values given by the ancestors assist individuals to live a proper life. The example set by ancestors ensures a harmonious community where everybody knows and understands their place and function. In doing so there is continuity with the past. The social structure of the extended family is maintained. In this way ancestors are guardians of traditions (Mbiti 1989:85; Nürnberger 2007:29).

Psychological interpretation

From a psychological point of view it seems as if there is a close bond between ancestors and descendants. Individuals frequently consult the ancestors for advice on daily decisions. This sense of dependence on the permission and advice of the ancestors provide individuals with comfort and security. Advice from ancestors helps humans to cope with struggles and stress in life. This dependence on ancestors also creates a sense of belonging. People know who they themselves are as well as who the people they encounter are on grounds of the identity of the ancestors.

WHO IS JESUS?

The question to who Christ is, is one of the most important and difficult questions that have to be answered. The answer has to be given by people according to their knowledge of Jesus Christ. The answer to who Jesus Christ is, is not a clear-cut answer, because everyone gives his or her answer according to his or her experience of Jesus Christ.

The many names given to Jesus Christ: An African Christian perspective

At the time of Jesus' life on earth there was also a struggle with the very same question of who Jesus is. He himself even asked this question 'Who do people say I am?' (Mt 16:13-20; Lk 9:18-21; Mk 8:27-30). People gave answers according to their different knowledge and beliefs about him.

They had different needs and expectations about him. That is why they gave answers that catered for their needs and expectations of that time. Some called him John the Baptist, Elijah, Prophet and Christ. All of these names carried with them some expectation of certain actions from Jesus Christ by the people. The people had the privilege of knowing about this man through his works and teachings. Their knowledge and context allowed them to give such answers or names and even though they were not really sure if they were right or wrong, they continued in their process of naming him.

All those names were not alien to their culture and religion. That is why they were able to come to the conclusion that this is who Jesus was because they had long expected this revelation. They had learned about this man and to them this is what they had expected: one day his identity will be revealed. It did not come to their attention whether those names were the correct titles or not, but the focus was on the belief of who this man was to them.

The question of who Jesus Christ is, is still very problematic for Christians today. The context and the belief are very different from each other, but the problem is the same and is still in need of an answer.

That is why Jesus Christ is known to some of the African Christians in the township of Mohlakeng in Randfontein as Son of God, Lord, Saviour, Holy God and even Anointed One. These are some of the names that are used by Christians when they refer or call to Jesus Christ, because there are no other names that one can use when calling to Jesus Christ except these names that are in the Bible.

They were taught that this is how you call Jesus Christ and nothing else. 'All of these names are used when calling Jesus Christ because one cannot use other names than those revealed to Christians by the Word of God' (response during an informal interview).

Another respondent stated: 'We also had some expectations from Jesus Christ, because of what we were taught about Him by the missionaries who brought the Gospel to us, the African people' (response during an informal interview) and further, 'We only know God as the only Saviour and Lord from the Old Testament, but the focus changed when the missionaries came with the Bible, teaching the New Testament' (response during an informal interview). People started to see things differently, and also started to believe differently because of Jesus Christ who was brought into the picture. They had to learn now how to relate to God in a different form, how to believe in him and who he will be to them. At this point they were in the similar position as those people who were asked the question by Jesus Christ: 'Who do people say I am?' (Mt 16:13-20). In order for them to give an answer to the question they depended on the religious beliefs about Jesus Christ. 'The Bible was the source that was appropriate for us to use as it was the only thing we believed to be true about the Lord and that would help us to stay true to our belief and be able to give an answer to the question' (response during an informal interview).

That is why these Africans gave Jesus Christ those names. They believe that you cannot give Jesus Christ other names that are different from those revealed in the Bible. As the Lord, He is above any name that comes from ordinary human beings.

An alternative African Christian perspective

Some of the African Christians interviewed understand Jesus Christ differently. They know him as the Great Ancestor, powerful Leader or Chief and Healer. Küster also describes the use of these titles as ways in which African Christians understand Christ (1999:59-66). These are some of the names among the many others that are used by African Christians to refer to Jesus Christ.

These African Christians believe in naming him differently according to the way they know him and were taught about him from the Bible and through the education by their parents. It is not difficult to call him Great Ancestor, powerful Leader and Healer because their culture and belief help them to accept him in this way. This is how he has revealed himself to them. This is who he is to them.

According to these Christians, Jesus Christ made himself known uniquely to them in their culture. He cannot be known or understood apart from their cultural context. The relevance of Christ is first appreciated after a time of living in relationship with him. It is only the people themselves, as they relate to Christ and explore his relevance, that are able to give an adequate answer to the question about the cultural relevance of Christ for them (Fotland 2005:36).

Someone who has had an experience with something or someone is in a better position of explaining his or her

feeling or findings according to the experience he or she has had. The point is that no one can really be in a position to say who Christ is to him or her without some knowledge about Jesus Christ. A certain relationship must have existed before one can be able to clearly say who Jesus Christ is. Christians already know about this relationship, because Jesus Christ is not only Lord, but also the Lord who is with us.

Africans are known as people who like living in a group (Mbiti 1989:102), even if the group consists of people with different perspectives. One will never find someone who lives alone far apart from other people. Even a stranger gets accommodated somewhere in the village by the African people. This is how African people are: You need to try and have some kind of a relationship with everyone and in this way you can be able to say something about them to other people who did not have the privilege to meet or know them.

That is the reason why Africans are able to say something about Jesus Christ, because they have this unexplainable relationship with Him, as African Christians.

BY WHAT NAME?

Christ as Great Ancestor

Research in the community of Mohlakeng under African Christians has shown that the naming of Jesus as Great Ancestor is one element that stands out prominently in their whole religious belief system, as well as their cultural context.

It is not uncommon among Africans to refer to Jesus as Ancestor. Küster indicates the parallels between Jesus as Ancestor and the role of ancestors in an African context: Jesus can be Ancestor because He mediates life, because He is present among the living, because He is simultaneously the eldest and because He is the mediator between God and human beings (1999:63–64).

The one most prominent characteristic of African culture is the belief in ancestors (Stinton 2004:133). For Africans Jesus can be a Great Ancestor, because for them ancestors are something big and powerful just like Jesus is. According to Fotland, "'ancestor' is the most significant African title to be used for Jesus Christ because the ancestor is the most visible and prominent aspect of the transcendent realm' (Fotland 2005:37).

Jesus Christ was a respected man, yet not just mere man, but the Lord. This was taught to Africans by missionaries and they believe this about Him. As Lord, Africans say, it is not impossible for Him to become the Great Ancestor and be revealed to them as their Great Ancestor. Even the Bible speaks about different aspects that are required of one to be an ancestor according to African culture.

Firstborn

The absent God (*Deus Absconditus*) came close to his creation when God sent his Son, Jesus, to be born in a human form. From Biblical texts we derive the idea of Jesus as the firstborn among many (cf. Rm 8:29; Col 1:15; Heb 2:10–18). Jesus is described as the eldest brother of man (Schreiter 2002:121). Jesus then is the firstborn of God in the world. Through this familial relationship with God through Jesus, human beings can talk with God,

through their Ancestor Jesus. Through consulting Jesus, human beings can follow the will of God.

Originator

God is the Creator and Recreator of a world gone astray due to sin. Through Jesus all are born anew amid the guilt of sin. He becomes the Progenitor of a new race belonging to God (cf. Jn 3:5-8). Everyone who believes in the forgiveness of God through Jesus becomes part of the family of God (Eph 2:19). There then comes a bond into existence between the living and the dead of one family. Children of God live with the eschatological expectation that Jesus will one day return to restore life for his 'family'.

Jesus performing the functions of ancestors

Although the different tasks of ancestors, as seen by Africans, have not been completely investigated, it is safe to say that ancestors have the task of being messengers between God and man. Ancestors can bless, protect and give advice (cf. Stinton 2004:134). Ancestors give guidance in the governance of the tribe to ensure proper functioning of society. Ancestors function as intercessors with God, imploring God for help and forgiveness. This role is seen as one of the many acts of mercy that Jesus also fulfils (1 Jn 2:1; Rm 8:34).

Ancestors, being big and powerful, are expected to perform and give certain things for the community in which they had lived (Nürnberg 2007:30). Because they have departed from the world of the living and are believed to be in the world of the dead, they are believed to be still part and parcel of the community they had lived in. In the same manner Jesus has departed from the world of the living and entered the world of the spirits, but still he has power over all the living creation and still lives and influences the world he once lived in. All of this is what African Christians believe concerning Jesus Christ and their ancestors.

The ancestors are expected to teach within the community about the correct way of living, the do's and don'ts that people have to know about concerning life. Similarly, Jesus taught the people of his time. He is still doing so even today but as an Ancestor, because He has departed from this world and He is teaching the Word of God, and the Word includes the good moral way of living.

The ancestors also tell the people to repent from their evil ways, and if they do not oblige they bring punishment into their lives in different forms. When the people bring sacrifices to the ancestors, they accept and acknowledge their sins. Their punishment is wiped out after this has been done and they have accepted the deceased relatives as powerful and great ancestors. Before this happens, nothing can change.

Jesus Christ told the people to repent from their sins, and if they do not oblige they will receive punishment. Jesus was simultaneously the one paying for their sins by His blood when He died on the cross at Calvary. He sacrificed his blood. Only someone who is powerful and respected by his people can be able to accomplish this in society.

Not just anyone accedes to the rank of ancestor. It is not enough to die, one must have 'lived well' – that is, have led a virtuous life. One must have observed the laws and have incurred the guilt neither of theft nor of a dissolute life. One must have not have been a wrathful or quarrelsome person, or have dabbled in sorcery. One must have been a leaven of unity and communion among human beings (Kuster 2001:118). Stinton attests to these prerequisites for becoming an ancestor (2004:135).

Jesus Christ lived such an exemplary life on earth. People listened to His teachings and guidance. This made Him qualify as Ancestor. Furthermore, as He had such great power to defeat evil, surely He is a Great Ancestor – granting protection from all the dangers of this world, including evil things, or from the devil himself, providing food, stable homes and granting protection to those who are weak and who cannot stand up for themselves against great powers or oppression, and to the children and women who are defenceless. Jesus declared: 'I am the bread of life, he who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who comes to me will never be thirsty' (Jn 6:35).

These are among the many duties that have to be performed by the ancestors in the daily lives of the people living in the community. No ordinary living human being can be able to give these things to the people. Jesus Christ who is forever present watching over everyone's life and who gives life as only God can is able to do these things. 'As [the ancestors] watch over the life of their descendants and continuously strengthen it, so does Christ continuously nourish the life of the believers' (Küster 2001:120). Ancestors are expected to give everything, including life itself, and the very same thing is expected from Jesus Christ as a Great Ancestor.

The ancestors are also expected to rule over the life of the community. They can accomplish this because they have great powers. They could not accomplish these things while they were still alive on earth.

One difference between the living and the "living dead" is that the latter have much more power than they had during their earthly existence, and that their sphere of influence is greatly extended.

(Brand 2002:116)

Jesus Christ is also expected to rule over life more powerfully now because He is an Ancestor and because His power has been extended.

Jesus Christ is in our lives every time we need him. Like ancestors, he can provide in spiritual needs more than anyone; he can even care better than ancestors. he can do this because he is our Great Ancestor. This is what African Christians believe, because Jesus Christ, like any other ancestor, was created by God and he is also God's Son. One can trust him as an ancestor with everything: from giving life, care, protection, guidance to even giving punishment. He is God and He is able to accomplish anything without anyone's help.

This concept of Jesus Christ is not that complicated for both the African Christians and those who are traditional Christians. Both parties can relate to Jesus in this way. Jesus Christ can be an Ancestor to the Africans. This makes it easier to pass on the message of the gospel to Africans.

CAN JESUS BE CALLED ANCESTOR?

It is not so easy to merely equate Jesus with an ancestor as Africans understand it. There are several questions that make it difficult, almost impossible, to talk of Jesus as an Ancestor in an African context.

One of the first questions to arise would be why then should only Jesus be venerated as Ancestor? Why him alone? Why should other family ancestors make way for Jesus as the only Ancestor worthy of worship? According

to the African cultural background, the question would also be whether Jesus then truly is an African and from what tribe would he be (cf. Pobee, 1979, cited in Stinton 2004:139). This would immediately exclude some tribes from worshipping Jesus. Different tribes have different ancestors. If Jesus becomes an Ancestor, it would mean the complete system of ancestor veneration with all the implications associated is acknowledged (Nürnberg 2004:105).

The moment Jesus is equated with an ancestor, the divinity of Jesus is negated or ignored. An ancestor cannot simultaneously be God and of human nature. Of what nature will descendants then be: human, divine or both? Jesus as the Son of God and as Ancestor would simply not do. Against this argument, Pobee answers that the Nicene Crede states that Jesus is fully God and human simultaneously. By addressing Jesus as Ancestor, this relationship between God and humankind is bridged. The living Ancestor, namely Jesus, becomes the connection between humankind and God (Stinton 2004:140).

To accept Jesus as Ancestor would include accepting a specific worldview. Only in a community with a dynamistic and animistic worldview is it possible to imagine the existence of ancestors and their influence on a community's life a reality. Even if Jesus is accepted as Ancestor, it may in some cases lead to henotheism. There might be many powerful ancestors to worship and ask for advice, but only one is powerful enough to provide in that which is asked of him.

One of the key questions in this debate is, as Stinton (2004:137) indicates, the question whether there is any place for maintaining a relationship with deceased family members when one converts to Christianity. There are many answers to this question, which range from an inclusiveness of ancestors similar to the veneration of saints in Catholic tradition (Stinton 2004:160) to a total denial of any value of maintaining the practice of ancestor veneration, as ancestors cannot come between us and Christ (cf. Nürnberg 2007:105). No authority can take precedence above Christ.

Is Jesus then not an Ancestor? According to the arguments stated above, it would be difficult and even unwise to portray Jesus as Ancestor. Jesus is not the same as merely deceased human family. Although it may be an honest effort to indigenous Christianity in an African context (Stinton 2004:159) when portraying Jesus as Ancestor, it creates too many problems.

One of the problems lies in the metaphor used. All descriptions of Jesus remain metaphors (cf. Nürnberg 2007:104). It is important that the meaning of the metaphor is clear when applied to Jesus. The metaphor should not bring about confusion (Nürnberg 2007:104; Stinton 2004:159). Portraying Jesus as Ancestor according to an African understanding of ancestors goes against the meaning of the life and work of Jesus as portrayed in the Bible.

The Bible presents principles against a specific cultural backdrop. The background can sometimes be mistaken for the principle. The Bible should be read as presenting the issue of life after death against the backdrop of animism and even dynamism. The question of life after death can be placed against a different backdrop in our times. In our times there might still be cultures that have an animistic worldview, which make provision for spirits residing among humans. The Bible operates at the same level and accepts the existence of a spiritual world. The principle presented is that nothing, not even ancestral spirits, can be placed above God (cf. Rm 8:31-39, also see Nürnberg 2007:105).

Nevertheless, the discussion of Jesus as Ancestor is seen by some (Stinton 2004:165) as part of an ongoing process where Africans still endeavour to make Christ familiar to Africans. On the question whether Jesus can be portrayed as Ancestor, Stinton concludes: inconclusive! (2004:165).

CONCLUSION

Our research on this topic leads to the following conclusion. It is a given reality that some African Christians have no problem in addressing Jesus as the Great Ancestor. This is evident from interviews conducted in the township of Mohlakeng in Randfontein. As to the theological evaluation of this situation, three standpoints become clear.

Yes: Jesus is an Ancestor (Pobee and Bujo)

John Pobee was one of the first (1979) exponents of the viewpoint that Jesus can successfully be portrayed as an Ancestor. To portray Jesus as Ancestor is a possible way in which to make the Christology clear to Africans (Stinton 2004:140).

Bénézet Bujo believes the main feature of African culture is the belief in ancestors. To introduce Christianity to Africa, there must be a connection with ancestral beliefs. All life comes from God. Ancestors become the ones that mediate that life to people (Stinton 2004:141). Jesus becomes the proto-Ancestor, the model upon whose life all followers are to build their lives (Stinton 2004:143).

No: Jesus can never be an Ancestor (Nürnbergger)

To believe in the worship and veneration of ancestors one must follow a traditionalist mindset (Nürnbergger 2007:234). 'Modernity has come to dominate the world and threatens traditionalism' (Nürnbergger 2007:234). Postmodernity is on the rise, but as Nürnbergger puts it: all forms of postmodernity 'do not seem to have changed direction in their fundamental assumptions' (2007:234). Postmodernity and modernity challenge religious convictions and expressions of such convictions. To present Jesus as Ancestor as solution to the challenges of postmodernity is not an adequate solution and still presupposes a traditionalist mindset that will be anachronistic.

Christians accept the authority of the Word of God (Nürnbergger 2007:234). There can be no higher authority than God (Nürnbergger 2007:72). The problem with ancestor veneration and worship is the acknowledgement of ancestors to be in a special position of authority. This creates problems for Christianity in Africa (Nürnbergger 2007:26). There can be no other authority (ancestors) above or beside Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Nürnbergger 2007:78), who exercise some kind of authority over the living (Nürnbergger 2007:85). Nürnbergger concludes on grounds of several arguments (2007:96) that the death and resurrection of Christ cannot be compared to the death of people who then become ancestors, and therefore Christ cannot be called Ancestor.

Uncertainty: It is unclear whether Jesus can be an Ancestor or not (Stinton)

Stinton believes that the whole issue of Jesus as Ancestor has not been researched enough and that no final conclusion is possible. Of course there are problems either way, seeing Christ as Ancestor or not. The safest conclusion would be, according to Stinton, to declare the issue 'inconclusive' (Stinton 2004:165).

It is neither just about a new title for Jesus, an Africa-specific title, nor even an Africa metaphor used for Christ (cf. Nürnberger 2007:100). It is about an understanding of Christology and consequently an understanding of soteriology. Africa still needs to search for a Christology explaining the redemptive work of Christ. Until then we all worship God and call upon him in imperfect language.

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